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SUBJECT: THESSALONIKI: UNIVERSITIES BLAME GOVERNMENT AND POLITICAL
PARTIES FOR VIOLENT STUDENT PROTESTS

REF: ATHENS 778

¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY: On June 6, the heads of Greece's universities called for the creation of an "Education Committee" comprising representatives of all political parties, following violent student protests at Thessaloniki's two largest universities. Political leaders have condemned the incident, but disagree on who is responsible and what should be done to prevent a re-occurrence. University administrators fault the government and political parties for provoking incidents in which protesters roughed up the Rector of Aristotle University and two University guards and forcibly detained the University of Macedonia Rector and members of the Deans' Council in a campus conference room for eight hours. The violent incidents have at least temporarily turned public opinion against the protesters, but prospects for controversial government-proposed university reforms such as recognition of degrees from private, non-profit universities remain dim. END SUMMARY

¶2. (SBU) On June 6, the Rectors of Greece's universities reacted to violent student protests at Thessaloniki's two largest universities by calling for the creation of an "Education Committee" composed of representatives of all political parties. The proposal reflected statements by Thessaloniki university administrators that the GoG and all political parties shared responsibility for provoking student anger. Political leaders condemned the incidents and blamed each other for being the instigators, without proposing remedies. One department head faulted the GoG for inadequate prior consultation with students on reforms. (Note: the Parliament passed a law in March that altered student voting rights in elections of rectors and required universities to submit a four-year plan and annual reports to parliament. In late May, the government failed to muster the required majority in Parliament to amend the constitution to allow recognition of private non-profit universities - reftel. End note).

¶3. (SBU) On May 29, a group of students forced their way into the Deans' Council meeting at Aristotle University in Thessaloniki (Greece's largest university) to protest education reforms. The protesters physically assaulted the head of the University, Rector Anastasios Manthos, who was hospitalized with a mild concussion. On May 31, protesters attacked two security guards at Aristotle University, sending them to the hospital with multiple injuries. A previously unknown anarchist group calling itself "Anarchists Against General Security" claimed responsibility. The group said the victims were "an extension of the police" and therefore in violation of the so-called

"asylum" law prohibiting police from entering universities. Rector Manthos told us from his hospital bed May 30 he believed the incident would backfire against the protesters and reforms would continue.

¶4. (SBU) University officials accused the police of failing to aid the Aristotle University guards despite repeated phone calls for help. Media reported that police refused to enter the campus without a warrant from a prosecutor, but a senior police official told post that the university had not called for help. Thessaloniki Prosecutor Floridis suggested publicly that both the police and university officials shared in the blame. He noted that he had issued a blanket authorization to the police in November 2006 to intervene on campus in response to such crimes, and that the university should issue a similar general authorization (rather than reacting on a case by case basis).

¶5. (U) On June 4, a group of 50 students physically prevented the Rector and members of the Deans' Council of the University of Macedonia (Thessaloniki's second largest university) from exiting the conference room in which the Council had just approved the school's four-year financial plan (required by the latest reform law). The students demanded that the Deans revoke their decision and hand over the minutes of the meeting. The Deans resisted but suffered the indignity (and discomfort) of being forcibly confined to the conference room for eight hours by protesters.

¶6. (SBU) COMMENT: Almost all Greeks agree the students and anarchists in Thessaloniki went too far in beating up a well-respected rector and two unarmed campus guards, but there has been little discussion of how to prevent a recurrence, e.g. by amending or clarifying the "asylum" law that restricts police

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from entering campus. In the absence of such measures, a small group of politically active students continues to wield inordinate influence over the reform process and any negotiation, and appears to be able to dictate terms for the functioning of Greece's public universities. The proposed "Education Committee" is unlikely to resolve the deep hostility between students, administrators and the government. Tensions may flare again later this month during elections of department chairs. Embassy Athens and CG Thessaloniki will continue to urge the GoG to stay the course towards long overdue educational reforms, including finding means to allow the recognition of private non-profit universities such as the American College of Greece, and the American College of Thessaloniki. END COMMENT
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